

The Builder.

No. CCCXXVIII.

SATURDAY, MAY 19, 1849.



THE announcement of a new book on architecture by Mr. Ruskin, the author of "Modern Painters," at first known only as "an Oxford Graduate," has, doubtless, excited the curiosity of such of our readers as are acquainted with the latter remarkable and interesting work. Mr. Ruskin has long given attention to the picturesque in architecture. "He wrote the series of papers 'On the Poetry of Architecture,' signed *Kata Phasis*, in *London's Magazine* (if we remember rightly), and we anticipated much gratification in the perusal of his more extended observations and matured opinions.

The volume has come into our hands too recently for a careful examination of all the writer's views on the present occasion, and we must content ourselves mainly with giving some idea of the contents of it.

The title is a taking one,—“The Seven Lamps of Architecture.”* It sounds romantic, recalls Aladdin, and, moreover, is not at once understood, and so whets curiosity. What are these lamps? say many:—they are lamps which, of themselves, throw no light on the author's meaning. Let us give them some oil. The author's endeavour has been to extricate from the confused mass of partial traditions and dogmata with which the art of architecture has become encumbered, those large principles of right which are applicable to every stage and style of it,—to determine, as the guides of every effort, some constant and general laws of right, based upon man's nature, and not his knowledge. To do this would indeed be something. “Their range,” he says, “necessarily includes the entire horizon of man's action. But they have modified forms and operations belonging to each of his pursuits, and the extent of their authority cannot surely be considered as a diminution of its weight. Those peculiar aspects of them which belong to the first of the arts, I have endeavoured to trace in the following pages; and since, if truly stated, they must necessarily be, not only safeguards against every form of error, but sources of every measure of success, I do not think that I claim too much for them in calling them the lamps of Architecture.”

And thus the author names them,—The lamp of Sacrifice, the lamp of Truth, the lamp of Power, the lamp of Beauty, the lamp of Life, the lamp of Memory, and the lamp of Obedience; or, as they stand on the cover of the book, *Religio, Observantia, Auctoritas, Fides, Obsequium, Memoria, et Spiritus*. From this the tone of the work may be pretty correctly guessed at; this is a brick from which the character of the house may be judged.

Enthusiasm, strong convictions, and high religious feelings, mark the work; and though we are disposed to think they have carried the author in parts out of the regions of plain sense, claim attention and consideration. He enters upon the task almost solemnly; says the aspect of the year is full of mystery, the

weight of evil against which we have to contend, increasing like the letting out of water, and that it is no time for the idleness of metaphysics, or the entertainment of the arts. There is no action so slight that may not be done to a great purpose, nor any purpose so great but that slight actions may be so done as to help it much, “especially that chief of all purposes, the pleasing of God.” To the strength of this motive, desire to please God, he attributes the excellence of the mediæval structures; on this ground he calls for “the offering of precious things, merely because they are precious, not because they are useful or necessary,” and condemns, as others have done before him, the “nicely calculated less or more,” in church building. It is not the church we want, but the sacrifice; not the emotion of admiration, but the act of adoration; not the gift, but the giving.” Without advocating meanness in our own dwellings, he would get rid of “cornices of ceilings and graining of doors, and fringing of curtains, and thousands such; things which have become foolishly and apathetically habitual—things on whose common appliance hang whole trades, to which there never yet belonged the blessing of giving one ray of real pleasure, or becoming of the remotest or most contemptible use,—things which cause half the expense of life, and destroy more than half its comfort, manliness, respectability, freshness, and facility.” And he says that “the tenth part of the expense which is sacrificed in domestic vanities, if not absolutely and meaninglessly lost in domestic discomforts and incumbrances, would, if collectively offered and wisely employed, build a marble church for every town in England; such a church as it should be a joy and a blessing even to pass near in our daily ways and walks, and as it would bring the light into the eye to see from afar, lifting its fair height above the purple crowd of humble roofs. I have said for every town: I do not want a marble church for every village; nay, I do not want marble churches at all for their own sake, but for the sake of the spirit that would build them.”

The two conditions which he considers enforced by the spirit of sacrifice, are, first, that we should in everything do our best; and, secondly, that we should consider increase of apparent labour as an increase of beauty in the building.

“For the first: it is alone enough to secure success, and it is for want of observing it that we continually fail. We are none of us so good architects as to be able to work habitually beneath our strength; and yet there is not a building that I know of, lately raised, wherein it is not sufficiently evident that neither architect nor builder has done his best. It is the especial characteristic of modern work. All old work nearly has been hard work. It may be the hard work of children, of barbarians, of rustics; but it is always their utmost. Ours has as constantly the look of money's worth, of a stopping short wherever and whenever we can, of a lazy compliance with low conditions; never of a fair putting forth of our strength.”

The extent to which the author would carry this out is shown by his remark, “that whenever, by the construction of a building, some parts of it are hidden from the eye which are the continuation of others bearing some consistent ornament, it is not well that the ornament should cease in the parts concealed; credit is given for it, and it should not be deceptively

withdrawn: as, for instance, in the sculpture of the backs of the statues of a temple pediment; never, perhaps, to be seen, but yet not lawfully to be left unfinished.”

It is scarcely necessary to say that all imitations and architectural deceptions are denounced, as positive sin: and though we do not view the question in quite so serious a light (we have more than once fully argued the subject), we go with him when he says,

“For, as I advocated the expression of the Spirit of Sacrifice in the acts and pleasures of men, not as if thereby those acts could further the cause of religion, but because most assuredly they might therein be infinitely ennobled themselves, so I would have the Spirit or Lamp of Truth clear in the hearts of our artists and handicraftsmen, not as if the truthful practice of handicrafts could far advance the cause of truth, but because I would fain see the handicrafts themselves urged by the spurs of chivalry; and it is, indeed, marvellous to see what power and universality there is in this single principle, and how in the consulting or forgetting of it lies half the dignity or decline of every art and act of man.”

We may convey our author's opinion on the limits of license, by saying that if graining be so ill done that no one can mistake it for the wood it represents, it is lawful, but if so good as to deceive it is illegal and a lie!

The use of cast work he considers a downright and inexcusable falsehood. “You use that which pretends to a worth which it has not, which pretends to have cost, and to be, what it did not, and is not: it is an imposition, a vulgarity, an impertinence, and a sin. Down with it to the ground—grind it to powder,” &c. &c. Down with it to the ground if you like, when you can put something better in its place. We have no love for cast work, generally speaking; but we cannot afford to give it up altogether, and as to calling it a sin (except in many cases against good taste and propriety), we would not venture on such a step.

No one is ever deceived into taking “compo” for stone: it is exactly what it seems to be—“compo,” and (like Wordsworth's yellow primrose) nothing more. It has many sins to answer for; but still it would not be wise to give it up.

The use of cast-iron he considers one of the most active causes in the degradation of our national feeling for beauty.

In designing, the author thinks light and shade the great points to be considered: “after size and weight, the Power of architecture may be said to depend on the quantity (whether measured in space or intenseness) of its shadow;” and he urges, that among the first habits that a young architect should learn, “is that of thinking in shadow, not looking at a design in its miserable living skeleton; but conceiving it as it will be when the dawn lights it, and the dusk leaves it.”

No matter how common or clumsy the means,—so that shadow be got, our author is satisfied; he seems to attach little value to the beauty resulting from proportion, fitness, and propriety;—he finds charms only in the massive, the rude, or the ruined.

In treating of beauty, Mr. Ruskin, insisting on the fact that “all most lovely forms and thoughts are directly taken from natural objects,” assumes the converse of this, namely, “that forms which are not taken from natural objects must be ugly,” and then attacks the Greek fret, on grounds which cannot be admitted as valid. He says,—“The first so-called ornament, then, which I would attack is

* “The Seven Lamps of Architecture.” By John Ruskin, author of “Modern Painters.” London, Smith, Elder, and Co. 1849.